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The Waxman Cometh: Meet Our New Congressman*

By Susan Chasen

It's safe to say that Congressman Henry Waxman, D-LA, has a good shot at winning re-election this year on November 5, as he has done every two years since 1974. But one difference this time is that he is seeking to represent Topanga, Malibu and the rest of the Santa Monica Mountains to the county line as a result of redistricting adopted last year by the state Legislature.

Waxman is a 28-year incumbent and he is running in one of the most staunchly Democratic districts in the country, as well as one of the most affluent.

The new 30th Congressional District which now includes Topanga, also retains West Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Westwood, Bel Air, Brentwood, Pacific Palisades and Santa Monica from Waxman's old district. The eastern boundary is La Brea Avenue, near Waxman's current office and the center of his old district.

In an interview with the *Messenger* on September 27, after a busy morning and a quick can of salmon for lunch, Waxman discussed a few of his many passions as a legislator—from his groundbreaking work exposing the inner workings of the tobacco industry to his career-long dedication to health and environmental causes to the current prospect of war with Iraq.

On October 10, Waxman joined the Congressional majority in a 296 to 133 vote in favor of a resolution authorizing President Bush to use force against Iraq. He first argued in support of an alternative resolution that didn't pass that authorized force only in cooperation with the United Nations and required further authorization from Congress for unilateral action.

"We should do all we can to secure a [U.N.] Security Council endorsement of an invasion of Iraq, and possibly to avoid a war by forcing Saddam to abide by the U.N. requirements for disarmament," said Waxman during the House debate.

"If the U.N. does not act, it not only leaves Saddam unchecked, but it undermines, perhaps fatally, the purpose of having or supporting a U.N. in the first place.

In the end, however, Waxman supported the Bush-backed resolution authorizing unilateral action as "the strongest bipartisan signal possible" to pressure the U.N. to act.

HE'LL BE COMING ROUND THE MOUNTAINS

Back on the homefront, Waxman acknowledged that his personal experience in the Santa Monica Mountains has been limited, but he says he has always supported Congressman Brad Sherman in his efforts on behalf of the mountains and those of Congressman Anthony Beilenson before him. Plus, he thinks his own record is a good match for his new constituency.

"The new district, like the old district, and even more so, is very much an environmentally conscious area," said Waxman. "This fits in well with the issues I've worked on because I've been long a champion of environmental issues as well as health issues.

"It's just a beautiful area...that people want to see maintained as a national treasure."

LIFE IN THE BIG CITY

Waxman, 63, grew up in a home above his family's grocery store in Watts. His grandparents came to America around the turn of the century to escape persecution in Czarist Russia.

Though he is a native Angeleno, Waxman said he doesn't think he ever visited the Santa Monica Mountains as a child or a young man.

"I didn't know about the Santa Monica Mountains because I didn't grow up in West L.A.," said Waxman. "I don't think I was even aware of some of those magnificent hiking trails that I've come to enjoy in the last 5 to 10 years.

"Should the people in this district reelect me to Congress and I represent this new area, I plan to...work with everybody in the community to make sure we have the federal support for what we all want to do in preserving the Santa Monica Mountains."

Waxman said he supported House Resolution 640 just signed by Bush on October 9 to expand the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area by 3,492 acres. He also sought \$3 million on behalf of the city of Santa Monica for the Santa Monica Mountains Gateway visitor center project planned for 405 Pacific Coast Highway, originally Marion Davies' beachfront compound. But it

doesn't look like the full amount will make it into a final appropriation's bill.

Waxman said he is opposed to the Ahmanson Ranch development where 3,050 homes are planned on 2,800 acres north of the Ventura Freeway, just over the line into Ventura County. It would create, in one project, a community of over 8,000 people where none existed before.

"I've joined in the opposition to the Ahmanson Ranch project," said Waxman, "because I know the impact it's going to have on traffic, quality of life and the environment in the L.A. area particularly, even in Ventura County."

He cited concerns about polluted runoff from the development draining into Malibu Creek; traffic and infrastructure impacts; inadequate and outdated environmental studies as well as threats to the habitat of two endangered species—the California Red-legged Frog and the San Fernando Spineflower.

"I've been looking to see what we can do on the federal level," said Waxman.

SO MANY ISSUES, SO LITTLE TIME

Since Waxman was first elected to Congress in 1974 at age 35, he has never received less than 61 percent of the vote, perhaps because he is regarded as one of Congress' hardest-working, most accomplished lawmakers. He has tackled an enormous breadth of issues over the years, especially those related to health and environmental concerns, approaching each with personal conviction and humanitarian purpose.

After successfully warding off attempts during the Reagan years to weaken the Clean Air Act, Waxman was a

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—Henry Waxman

principal author of the revised Clean Air Act of 1990 to deal with smog, acid rain and destruction of the upper ozone layer and to prevent areas like the Grand Canyon from becoming polluted.

"We need to have a very strong federal law to make sure that we continue to reduce the air pollution that causes health problems and interferes with the quality of life in Los Angeles," said Waxman.

He sponsored Safe Drinking Water Act amendments in 1986 and 1996; the 1996 Food Quality Act, which regulated pesticides use on food, and measures to protect against household radon and lead exposure.

Waxman was chairman of the Commerce Committee's Health and Environment Subcommittee for 16 years. During that time, he advanced the cause of the public's "right to know" about local releases of toxic pollutants by industry; expanded access to healthcare, especially for senior citizens and children; established standards for nursing homes, and fought for women's reproductive rights and increased research funding for AIDS and women's health concerns.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

Perhaps his most dramatic health initiative was to call the tobacco industry to account for a cigarette-related death toll which he says is 400,000 annually. Smoking, he says, is the leading cause of preventable death in the country. His 1994 hearings on cigarette company practices, such as manipulating nicotine levels to promote addiction or targeting advertising to young people, led the way for tobacco lawsuits across the country which have been described as resulting in the biggest transfer of corporate money to state governments and lawyers in history.

"You cannot talk about health in this country without recognizing the terrible cost of cigarette smoking," said Waxman.

"I thought those hearings were a really important turning point in the public attitude toward tobacco because they gave a human face to the greed of an industry that was willing to be pushing a product that they knew was harmful.

"The chief executive officers of the tobacco companies appeared and took an oath to tell the truth and then immediately proceeded to lie about how harmful cigarettes were to people's health."

And yet, Waxman said he has been disappointed that the tobacco lobby has still been able to prevent legislation to allow the Food and Drug Administration to regulate tobacco or to prevent promotional campaigns that target children or discredit the United States in other countries.

"The tobacco companies tell them that to be American they should smoke their brand of cigarettes," said Waxman.

"The lawsuits have been helpful in bringing out more and more information about the deceptive, fraudulent, dishonest role that the companies have played for decades, but I've felt disappointed that many of the lawsuits resulted in money that hasn't been used for health care or anti-tobacco efforts."

Instead, he said, it has gone to build prisons, pave roads or just to help balance state budgets.

When the Republicans came to power in the House of Representatives eight years ago, Waxman conceded the chairmanship of the Health and Environment Subcommittee to a representative from the home of cigarette-maker Philip Morris.

"That really brought home to me how different things were going to be."

Another Waxman battle was to establish standards for nursing-home care after completing a study that found appalling conditions in Los Angeles facilities. Recently, he released another study that showed what he called "unconscionable gouging" in pricing of prescription drugs. He found that senior citizens in his district in Los Angeles were paying two to three times as much for prescriptions drugs as senior citizens in other countries.

Waxman said his commitment to the people's "right to know" about environmental hazards around them stemmed from the devastating release of poisonous gases in Bhopal, India, in 1984, that killed and maimed thousands.

COMING CLEAN

"We learned that, from many chemical facilities in the United States, there were the same releases of toxic gases—at a lower level, but at a steady level," said Waxman.

"We found out that in many communities adjacent to these facilities, the cancer rates were off the charts and birth defects were a common problem at levels far exceeding [those] elsewhere."

When he learned that the Environmental Protection Agency had no inventory of toxic air pollutants coming from these facilities, Waxman pushed for legislation to require disclosure of that information.

"When the toxic release inventory was prepared, it gave enormous impetus to legislators to make sure that these facilities use the best and most up to date equipment to limit the amount of pollution going into the environment. But if the public didn't have that information to start with, no one even realized there was a problem."

Those who were being injured, he said, were often afraid to come forward for fear plants would close and relocate.

Waxman's record on health issues dates back to his days on the Health Committee in the California Assembly. He was elected in 1968 and served three terms in the Assembly before running for Congress.

PARTY ANIMAL

With the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 and the loss of his chairmanship, Waxman also lost his ability to call hearings, subpoena witnesses and set the legislative agenda. So, using the only means available, Waxman has gained a status as a gadfly, writing pointed letters to the Republicans and the Bush Administration demanding answers on questions about the secrecy surrounding the formulation of Bush's national energy plan and the failure of the Republicans to investigate the political component of colossal business scandals like Enron.

He now serves as the ranking minority member on the Government Reform Committee and serves on the Energy and Commerce Committee as well.

Currently, he is taking the Bush Administration to task over the failure of the Transportation Security Administration to fully implement a program to scan luggage for explosives at airports. According to his survey of 155 explosives detection machines out of 218 being used, the machinery is only screening a tiny fraction of its capacity—less than 3 percent of machines are operating at even a minimum level. Instead, they are being used exclusively on luggage that meets certain computer profiling criteria, such as belonging to travelers paying cash for tickets or who are traveling one way, along with a number selected at random.

The difference, according to Waxman's letter to the Homeland Security Office, is that half a million bags are screened weekly instead of 4.3 million.

The problem, writes Waxman, is that airlines are only required to screen bags chosen by computer and have not adopted a recommendation to increase random screenings. Also, Waxman notes that the Bush Administration is seeking a one-year extension on the December 2002 deadline requiring all baggage to be screened, even though existing screening capability is not being used.

Another recent Waxman legislative effort is H.R. 2693 to require insurance companies doing business in the United States to release old insured lists to assist Holocaust survivors in filing claims for deaths and losses during World War II. In some cases, Waxman said, insurers have made unrealistic demands such as requiring death certificates of relatives killed in concentration camps or paperwork that Holocaust victims were forced to leave behind in their houses.

Almost from the start, Waxman has been a powerful force in Congress. In his third term, he was the first member of Congress to overcome seniority requirements to become chairman of the Health and Environment Subcommittee. He reportedly accomplished this by making a strong case for himself and through political savvy that included making campaign donations to other members—a tactic common in California at the time, but not yet common in Washington.

Waxman's Republican opponent in this year's election is Tony Goss. In the primary election in March, Goss ran unopposed and received 29,500 votes from Republicans. Waxman received 52,785 with Democratic challenger Kevin Feldman drawing 6,146 votes. Voter registration in the new 30th District is over 1.8 to 1 Democratic to Republican. There is no Green Party candidate running. The population of the new district is 639,088.

"I thought [the tobacco] hearings were a really important turning point in the public attitude toward tobacco because they gave a human face to the greed of an industry that was willing to be pushing a product that they knew was harmful."

Topanga has been in the 24th Congressional District and Congressman Sherman has been our representative for six years. Waxman has represented the 29th District. Now, Topanga and Waxman are in the 30th Congressional District, and Sherman is running in the 27th District to the north and east.

IRAQ REVISITED

Waxman, who has a political science and law degree from UCLA, is also known in Congress as an expert on the Middle East. Though he voted against going to war with Iraq in 1991, this time he reluctantly voted to support Bush's resolution in the interest of unity.

He said he thought Bush's rhetoric regarding Iraq was "overly bellicose" initially, but that he agrees that Saddam Hussein poses a potential threat.

"I hope we don't have to go to war. I think we should do everything we can to avoid war," said Waxman. "But we'll have to wait and see what develops because the threat of military action may be what will be necessary in order to avoid war."

While critical of Bush's original language, Waxman said his September speech to the United Nations may have played a valuable role in making sure that the international community doesn't ignore the problem as it has since 1998 when Hussein threw out inspectors who were trying to enforce U.N. resolutions.

"I feel strongly that the United Nations ought to be insisting on open and unfettered inspection and disarmament of Iraq and, if Saddam Hussein resists this, then the international community should make sure that they take whatever action is going to be necessary," said Waxman.

"If we wait until he does get a nuclear weapon we will have to take actions that are quite unthinkable because we're looking at nuclear proliferation and the threat that he could use it and the fear that we might have to use it ourselves to stop it."

Waxman said he supported establishing the Homeland Security agency to coordinate intelligence and other efforts to prevent future terrorist attacks, but that he believes civil liberties have to be protected as well.

"We're living in a new world since September 11, 2001, where we have to be mindful of security from possible terrorist attacks," said Waxman. "We have to balance out individual civil liberties with the public protection from terrorists and I think it's important that we be as careful to protect both. I fear that Attorney General Ashcroft has tilted the balance too much against individual liberties and that's something that concerns me and I'm watching that very carefully."

When asked whether it should be the United States' mission to prevent other countries from acquiring military powers that could challenge American world supremacy, Waxman said, "I don't think the U.S. ought to be strutting around the world stage as if we're the only ones who matter and we're going to make decisions for everybody else, including our allies, to tell them what to do without working with them as allies."

"I think there has been a real negative feeling by many of our longtime allies that the United States has just turned its back on issues that they care about and that many Americans care about like global warming. When we walked away under the Bush Administration from the Kyoto global warming treaty and acted as if global warming is not a real issue, I think we did a disservice to the goals of international cooperation to deal with what I consider a very real threat to our planet. But we also are not only doing a disservice to our environment, I think we're doing harm to the United State's role on the world stage as a force for cooperative efforts."

For the future, Waxman hopes to make progress on several goals which have apparently been abandoned by the current administration.

"I would like to move forward on prescription drug benefits for the elderly and more access to health care," said Waxman. "Those in power don't have the same interests in mind....They're not even on the agenda."

SAY IT AIN'T SO

He recounted recent Republican efforts that show how much the Democrats are on the defensive. He said, if Congress has its way, gun manufacturers will be the only manufacturers in the country that will be protected from liability lawsuits via H.R. 2037 the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act. Another Republican initiative he cited will allow health maintenance organizations and insurance companies to deny patients abortion information and services as a matter of conscience.

"We already have in law a 'conscience' provision that says a doctor or nurse or hospital that, for religious reasons, doesn't want to provide abortion services would not be required to do so. But this law would say that even if you have private health insurance from an HMO they could decide that they, as a matter of conscience, don't want to give you family planning or abortion services even though it's a medical service that's legal."

Waxman said if he is re-elected he may have to move his office from its present location at 8436 West 3rd Street.

"We are clearly going to have a presence much further west," he said.

Waxman's hardworking reputation comes at the price of hobbies and even reading for pleasure. Despite his ritzy constituency, he has never attended the Academy Awards.

But, he said, he does enjoy books on tape when he gets the chance to listen. One of his recent favorites is "Harlot on the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible" by Jonathan Kirsch that retells Bible stories that have been cleaned up in other versions so people wouldn't know of the terrible actions of some of the people in them.

"For those people who look at the Bible for religious sustenance," said Waxman of the book, "they realize that these are stories about people who were not like the ancient Greek gods, but were real people who were often good and often very, very flawed."

Waxman wasn't particularly familiar with Topanga, but he seems to expect that will change soon. He said he recently drove through the Canyon and stopped at one of our local shops and picked up our newspaper.

"I'm looking forward to spending more time in Topanga Canyon with the community groups and having opportunities to get to know people and for them to get to know me," said Waxman.

"I think it's just a wonderful, wonderful area. It's quite unique because it's got the small village feel in the middle of one of the most beautiful areas anywhere in the world." ■



PHOTO BY KATIE DALSENER

Congressman Henry Waxman in his office near the Beverly Center, says he may relocate to the Westside if he is re-elected Nov. 5.